CLAIMS

We Claim:

1. One or more computer-readable media containing computer-executable instructions for facilitating distance learning by performing the steps of:

dynamically constructing a toolbar's menu structure based on profile information retrieved from at least one menu profile server computer, wherein the menu structure includes at least one menu item that, when activated, launches at least one embedded application that is hosted on at least one remote server computer; and

displaying a client portion of the at least one embedded application within an embedded-application pane on a display of a user's computer.

2. The computer-readable media of claim 1 wherein the profile information is specific to at least one of an institution and an individual.

3. The computer-readable media of claim 1 wherein the profile information specifies at least one URL identifying the at least one remote server computer.

4. The computer-readable media of claim 3 wherein the at least one remote server is at least one of a Web server, a Window application server, and a Unix application server.

5. The computer-readable media of claim 1 wherein the at least one menu item is selected from the group consisting of: a terminal server client to a remote machine or application; a Unix shell client; an embedded browser; a local application; and an instance of a docked info bar.

6. The computer-readable media of claim 1 wherein the toolbar and the embedded-application pane are displayed within a Web browser's display.

7. The computer-readable media of claim 6 wherein the toolbar is displayed docked within the Web browser's display.

8. The computer-readable media of claim 6 wherein the at least one menu item is selected from the group consisting of: a hyperlink that, when activated, navigates a Web-page pane of the Web browser's display; a terminal server client to a remote machine or application; a Unix shell client; an embedded browser; a local application; and an instance of a docked info bar.

9. The computer-readable media of claim 6 wherein a user's interaction with Web content within a Web-page pane of the browser's display causes playback by an event engine of pre-recorded interaction with at least one application displayed in the embedded-application pane.

10. The computer-readable media of claim 1 wherein the at least one embedded application is an ActiveX COM object embedded within the toolbar.

11. The computer-readable media of claim 10 wherein the toolbar is an ActiveX COM object embedded within a browser displayed by the user's computer.

12. The computer-readable media of claim 1 wherein the toolbar and the embedded-application pane are displayed within a user's desktop.

13. The computer-readable media of claim 1 wherein the toolbar and the embedded-application pane are displayed within a display area of a Windows application running on the user's computer.

14. A user interface for a distance-learning system, the user interface comprising:

a Web-browser display;

a Web-page pane within the Web-browser display that displays a Web page;

a docked toolbar within the Web browser display, wherein the toolbar is populated with menu items based on profile information received from a remote server computer; and

an embedded-application pane that displays, within the Web-browser display, at least one application, which is activated from the docked toolbar.

15. The user interface of claim 14 wherein the profile information is specific to at least one of an institution and an individual.

16. The user interface of claim 15 wherein the menu items are selected from the group consisting of: a hyperlink that, when activated, navigates the Web-page pane; a terminal server client to a remote machine or application; a Unix shell client; an embedded browser; a local application; and an instance of a docked info bar.

17. The user interface of claim 15 wherein a user's interaction with Web content within the Web-page pane causes playback by an event engine of pre-recorded interaction with at least one application displayed in the embedded-application pane.

18. The user interface of claim 14 wherein the profile information specifies at least one URL identifying at least one remote server computer that hosts the at least one application.

19. The user interface of claim 14 wherein the at least one remote server is at least one of a Web server, a Windows application server, and a Unix application server.

20. A method of providing a distance-learning system, the method comprising:

dynamically constructing a toolbar's menu structure based on profile information retrieved from at least one menu profile server computer, wherein the menu structure includes at least one menu item that, when activated, launches at least one embedded application that is hosted on at least one remote server computer; and

displaying a client portion of the at least one embedded application within an embedded-application pane on a display of a user's computer.

21. The method of claim 20 wherein the profile information is specific to at least one of an institution and an individual.

22. The method of claim 20 wherein the profile information specifies at least one URL identifying the at least one remote server computer.

23. The method of claim 22 wherein the at least one remote server is at least one of a Web server, a Window application server, and a Unix application server.

24. The method of claim 20 wherein the at least one menu item is selected from the group consisting of: a terminal server client to a remote machine or application; a Unix shell client; an embedded browser; a local application; and an instance of a docked info bar.

25. The method of claim 20 wherein the toolbar and the embedded-application pane are displayed within a Web browser's display.

26. The method of claim 25 wherein the toolbar is displayed docked within the Web browser's display area.

27. The method of claim 25 wherein the at least one menu item is selected from the group consisting of: a hyperlink that, when activated, navigates a Web-page pane of the Web browser's display; a terminal server client to a remote machine or application; a Unix shell client; an embedded browser; a local application; and an instance of a docked info bar.

28. The method of claim 25 wherein a user's interaction with Web content within a Web-page pane of the browser's display causes playback by an event engine of pre-recorded interaction with at least one application displayed in the embedded-application pane.

29. The method of claim 20 wherein the at least one embedded application is an ActiveX COM object embedded within the toolbar.

30. The method of claim 29 wherein the toolbar is an ActiveX COM object embedded within a browser displayed on the user's computer.

31. The method of claim 20 wherein the toolbar and the embedded-application pane are displayed within a user's desktop.

32. The method of claim 20 wherein the toolbar and the embedded-application pane are displayed within a display area of a Windows application running on the user's computer.